



WESTERN NEWS

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Homeowners left with few cheap choices

"It was a Superfund site," my friend Nina told me, joking about a house she and her husband nearly bought in the crunched real estate market of the greater Yellowstone area. At first they loved the house and its affordable price.

Then an inspector informed them that the building was full of asbestos-laden vermiculite from Libby, Mont. Though the realtor tried to talk them into the deal anyway — "It's not so bad" — they walked away.

Two other friends weren't so lucky. The couple found their dream home in a small town near Glacier National Park. The weekly newspaper he worked for agreed to open a satellite office for him to run. The house had a finished basement, perfect for his wife's midwifery business. Then they began tearing out carpet and digging into walls to remodel and found a nightmare: insulation from Libby.

Somewhere between 15 million and 35 million buildings in the United States have been insulated with vermiculite mined from Libby. The vermiculite is loaded with tremolite asbestos, a virulent form of the fibrous mineral that causes lung cancer and pulmonary fibrosis. In Libby, a pretty mountain community of about 12,000 people, the death toll is around 200 and growing. The number of residents diagnosed with those terminal diseases is nearly 2,000.

W.R. Grace, which operated the vermiculite mine in Libby for nearly 30 years, made millions of dollars selling its do-it-yourself insulation to homeowners across America. The steel beams of the World Trade Center in New York were also fireproofed with vermiculite from Libby.



Writers on the Range

By Andrea Peacock

It's not difficult to clean asbestos out of a building. But it is costly. In Libby, where the EPA has been cleaning out homes, businesses and schoolyards, the cost was averaging \$50,000 per house at the end of 2002. Grace spun off its assets in the mid-1990s in anticipation of asbestos-related lawsuits, then declared itself bankrupt in 2001. That left the Environmental Protection Agency to pick up the tab, with funding coming from the beleaguered federal Superfund.

My friends who had moved near Glacier National Park were already stretched thin financially by their new mortgage. They could afford only the \$5,000 it cost to seal the deadly insulation in their walls. Further remodeling is prohibited, for as the EPA discovered in Libby, installing so much as a ceiling fan can send asbestos levels through the roof.

The experience of my friends is not unique. When I was promoting my book about Libby and asbestos this summer, a woman in Colorado nervously asked me, "My cabin is full of it; do you think that's bad?" A woman on a Utah radio talk show was perturbed when I told her she had a choice between spending tens of thousands to remove it from her home, or merely

thousands to seal it in.

"But we've already been exposed," she said, her voice full of anxiety. I had no answer for her. Nor for my friend when she asks me the same question, worried about her husband's health because he worked in the dust before they discovered the vermiculite.

"Would you live here?" she wants to know. I hesitate to tell her "no." It took me a year to get up the courage to look in my own attic.

Like the people of Libby, those who peek in their attics and find vermiculite have few places to turn for help. Though Grace knew before buying the mine in 1963 that the vermiculite was contaminated, and knew soon thereafter that some of its employees were sick and dying, it washed its hands of responsibility. My friends, and the woman in Utah, and the one in Colorado, and millions of others, must weigh their health against their pocketbooks and find some balance they can live with.

W.R. Grace's assets are now being litigated in bankruptcy court. A judge could decide to force the corporation to pay its bills — even if that forces Grace into true bankruptcy.

But when the officers of a corporation show such little conscience, such disregard for their fellow human beings, I think it's time — as one man dying with asbestosis told me — for that corporation "to disappear from the face of the earth."

Andrea Peacock is the author of Libby, Montana: Asbestos and the Deadly Silence of an American Corporation. She lives in Paradise Valley, Montana.